



A. Kuprin
YUSHKA





"Listen attentively, if you want me to tell you about it. Leave the tablecloth alone, my dear, and stop braiding the fringe.

"Her name was Yushka. At first, she was a small ball of fur with two lively eyes and a pale pink nose. The ball of fur would spend its days dozing in the sun on the window-sill, lapping milk from a saucer with its eyes closed and purring all the while, swatting flies on the pane, scampering about the floor, playing with a scrap of paper, a ball of wool or its own tail. None of us recalled when this mottled ball of fluff suddenly turned into a large, proud and graceful cat, a real beauty and the envy of all cat-lovers.

"In a word, this was a cat to end all cats. It was reddish-brown with ginger spots, a magnificent white

shirtfront, huge whiskers, a long silky coat, bushy hind legs and a tail like a lamp-brush.

"Put Bobik down, Nika. Do you think a puppy's ear is the handle of a street-organ? What if someone twisted your ear like that? Stop it, or I won't go on.

"That's better. The most remarkable thing about Yushka was her character. Have you ever stopped to think, my dear Nika, that many different animals come into our lives and we don't know a thing about them? Take all the dogs we've known, for instance. Each has its own temperament, its own habits. It's the same with cats. And with horses. And with birds.

"Tell me, have you ever seen such a restless, fidgety child as you, Nika? Why are you pressing your pinky into your eye? Does it make you see two lamps instead of one, and do they drift apart and come together again? Never put your fingers in your eye.

"And never believe anyone who speaks poorly of animals. You may be told that an ass is dumb. If a person wants someone to feel that he is stubborn, lazy and not very bright, he will politely call him an ass. I'd like you to know that an ass is not only an intelligent beast, but an obedient, kind-hearted and hard-working animal as well. However, if he's loaded with more than he can carry, or if someone decides he's a racehorse, he will simply stop in his tracks and say: 'This is too much for me. I just can't'. The driver can whip him all he wants, but still the ass won't budge.

"A horse is quite another matter. It is restless, impatient and easily offended. It will often do more than it is physically able to and will drop dead in its tracks from the effort.

"There is a saying that goes: 'as stupid as a goose'. Actually, no other bird is as intelligent. A goose will recognise





its master's steps. For instance, if you come home late at night, down the street, through the gate and across the yard, the geese will be as silent as if they were not there at all. But the moment a stranger enters they'll raise a hue, honking loudly, as if to say: 'Who's that gadding about?'

"Then again, they're.... Nika, don't chew on that paper. Spit it out.... If only you knew what wonderful parents they are! The goose and the gander take turns sitting on the eggs. In fact, the gander is even better at the job than the goose. If she lingers at the watering trough too long, gabbing with her neighbours as a female is wont to do, Mr. Gander will come over, pluck the back of her head and politely drag her off to the nest, back to her motherly duties. That's a fact!

"It's fun to watch a family of geese out for a walk. The master and defender leads the way. He's so proud and



pompous he raises his beak to the sky. He looks down on all the other fowl. There's trouble in store for an inexperienced pup or a scatterbrained child like you, Nika, if you don't step aside and let him pass. He'll snake his neck close to the ground and hiss like a bottle of soda water. Then he'll open his hard beak and the next day Nika will have a huge black-and-blue mark on her left leg, just under her knee, while the pup will go around shaking its pinched ear.

"The goslings follow close behind their father. They are yellow-green like catkin fuzz. They press close together and peep loudly. Their scrawny necks are featherless, and their legs are wobbly. It's hard to believe that when they grow up they'll look like their father. Mamma brings up the rear. It's difficult to describe her, for her expression is one of true bliss and triumph. She seems to be saying: 'I want the whole world

to admire my marvelous husband and magnificent children. Though I'm a mother and a wife, I must be truthful and say that there are none better on earth.' And off she goes, waddling along, waddling along.

"I'd like to say, Nika, that geese and dachshunds, which resemble crocodiles, hardly ever get hit by cars, though it's difficult to decide which of them is the more clumsy-looking.

"Or take a horse. What do people say of horses? They say a horse is a dumb beast, that it is merely a beautiful, fleet-footed animal with a good memory for places. Otherwise, it is most stupid, aside from being nearsighted, capricious and mistrustful, and that it will never make a good friend. However, only people who will keep a horse in a dark stable, who do not know the joy of taking a colt and bringing it up, who have never seen how grateful a horse is to the one who grooms it, who takes it to be shod, who feeds and waters it can say such a stupid thing. Such a person only cares about mounting a horse and seeing that it doesn't bite, kick or throw him. He will never think of offering it cool water, of taking a path where the ground is softer, of covering it with a blanket or his own coat during a stopover. Can you tell me why his horse should respect him?

"If you ask any born rider about horses he'll tell you that there's no other animal as intelligent, kind and noble as a horse, that is, if it is owned by a good and understanding person.

"The Arabs regard a horse as a member of the family. It is entrusted with the care of small children, as if it were a trusted nursemaid. And you know, Nika, a horse like that will crush a scorpion with its hoof and kick a wild beast to death. If a smudge-faced tot crawls off into the bushes where a snake might be hiding the horse will pick it up gently by its shirt



collar or pants and carry it back to the tent, as if to say: 'Don't go where you'll get in trouble, silly.'

"Sometimes horses die of being separated from their masters, and they weep real tears.

"This is a song the Cossacks of Zaporozhye sang about a horse and its dead master. He lay on the battlefield and

*His mare kept close to him,
Chasing flies off with her tail,
Gazing into his eyes,
Breathing into his face.*

"Now then, which of the two is right, the Sunday rider or the born rider?

"Oh, so you haven't forgotten about the cat? Very well. I'll tell you about it.

"That's too bad, though. I would have liked to tell you about so many other things: of how clean and clever the poor slandered pigs are, of how crows know of five different ways to trick a watchdog and get away its bone, of how camels.... Oh well, we'll leave the camels and get back to the cat.

"Yushka slept wherever she wanted to: on the sofas, the rugs, the chairs and on top of the sheet music on the piano. She loved to lie on newspapers, always crawling under the top page. There's something very appealing to a cat in the smell of newsprint. Besides, paper retains heat very well.

"She always came to visit me first, when the house began awakening, but only after her keen ear had caught the sound of the child's piping morning voice in the room next to mine.

"Yushka would open the door with her muzzle and paws, for it was never shut tight. She would enter, jump onto my bed, nuzzle my hand or cheek with her pink nose and utter a short *purrr*.



“She had never mewed in her life, but always uttered this rather musical sound: *purrr*. However, it had so many different shadings it could express anxiety, love, refusal, gratitude, displeasure, reproach, or a demand. A short *purrr* always meant: ‘Follow me.’

“She would jump off the bed and head for the door without once looking back. She never doubted my obedience.

“And I obeyed her. I would dress quickly and come out into the dim corridor. Her greenish-yellow chrysolite eyes shone as she waited outside the door to the room shared by a four-year-old and his mother. I would open it a crack. A short, grateful *purrr* would follow, and with a twist of her lithe body and a zig-zag of her bushy tail Yushka would slip into the nursery.

“The morning ceremony of greeting followed. At first, there was the semi-official duty call: a jump onto Mother’s bed and a *purrr*, to say: ‘Good morning, Mistress!’ Yushka’s nose

nudged her hand, then her cheek and the visit was over. Then she would jump down and over the netted side into the crib. Both parties greeted each other lovingly.

"*'Purrrr! Purrrr! Good morning, my friend. Did you sleep well?'*

"*'Yushka, my love! My dearest, dearest Yushka!'*

"A voice from the other bed would then say: 'Kolya, how many times have I told you not to kiss the cat! A cat breeds germs.'

"Yushka never wheedled. (She would always thank one meekly and sincerely for a favour.) However, she had made a detailed study of the butcher boy's delivery call and his footsteps. If she happened to be outside, she would always wait for the beef on the porch, and if she were at home, she would run to the kitchen for the beef. She could open the kitchen door by herself and with amazing skill. The doorknob was not a round ivory one as in the nursery, but a long brass one. Yushka would take a running jump and grasp the handle with her front paws, bracing her hind paws against the wall. Two or three thrusts of her lithe body would be followed by a click: the latch was open. It was easy going after that.

"Sometimes the boy would be a long time in cutting and weighing a piece of meat. Yushka would then sink her claws







into the edge of the table impatiently and begin swinging back and forth like an acrobat on a horizontal bar. But this was always done in silence.

"The butcher boy was a jolly, red-cheeked gawk who laughed easily. He was a great animal-lover and was truly in love with Yushka. But Yushka never let him as much as touch her. She would glance at him haughtily and leap aside. Oh, she was a proud one! As far as she was concerned the boy was merely someone who brought her meat every day. She regarded everything that was not a part of her household and did not come under her protection and patronage with royal hauteur. She most kindly accepted us.

"I liked to carry out her orders. For instance, I might be working over the hot frames, carefully pinching off suckers on a melon vine, for this called for calculation. I would be hot from the summer sun and the warm earth. Yushka would come up silently.

"*'Purr!'*

"That meant: 'Come, I'm thirsty.'

"I would straighten up with difficulty. Yushka would be off, leading the way. She would never turn to look back. Would I dare refuse her or drag my steps? She would lead me from the garden to the yard, then to the kitchen, then along the corridor to my room. I would politely open all the doors for her and respectfully let her pass. Once in my room, she would



leap gracefully onto the washstand where there was running water, quickly get a foothold on the marble sides with three of her paws and keep the fourth in the air for balance. She would then look at me over her shoulder and say:

“ ‘*Purr.* Turn on the water.’ ”

“I would let a thin silvery stream pour forth. Yushka’s narrow pink tongue would begin lapping quickly as she stood there with her neck arched gracefully.

“Cats do not drink often, but when they do they drink a lot and at length. I would tease her sometimes by turning back the nickel-plated faucet, decreasing the flow to a drip.

“Yushka would be annoyed. She would shift her weight impatiently in her uncomfortable stance and turn her head. Two yellow topazes would gaze at me with obvious reproach.

“ ‘*Purrrr!* Enough of your silliness!’ And she would nudge the faucet several times.

“I would feel ashamed, beg her pardon and turn on the flow again.

“Here is another example.

“Yushka would be sitting on the floor in front of the ottoman, beside a sheet of newspaper. I would enter and stop. Yushka would gaze at me unblinkingly. I would stare back at her. A minute would pass. I could clearly read the expression in her eyes.

“ ‘You know what I want, but you’re making-believe you don’t. Well, I’m not going to ask you.’ ”

“I would bend over to pick up the newspaper and immediately hear a soft thud. She was now waiting on the ottoman. Her gaze had become warmer. I would make a tent out of the paper and cover her, with only her bushy tail protruding. It would be gradually drawn in, bit by bit, under the paper roof. The newspaper would rustle once or twice and



move, and that was that. Yushka was asleep. I would leave the room on tiptoe.

"There were times of special serene joy at home with Yushka. This was when I would stay up writing late into the night. It is a rather tiresome occupation, but if you get into the habit it offers a lot of quiet satisfaction.

"There I'd be, scratching away at the paper with my pen, when I'd suddenly realise I couldn't find a word I really needed. I'd stop. How still it was! The kerosene would hiss gently in the lamp. I could hear the surf pounding, and this made the night seem more quiet still. All the people were asleep, and all the beasts, and the horses, and birds, and children, and Kolya's toys in the next room. Even the dogs had stopped barking, because they, too, had fallen asleep. My eyes would be heavy, my thoughts would blur and drift away. Then I would wonder whether I was in a dense wood or on top

of a high tower. I would come to from a soft but firm jolt. It was Yushka, who had leaped lightly from the floor to the desk. I had not noticed her entering.

"She would circle round in one spot on the desk, hesitate when she found a place to her liking, and then sit down by my right hand, a furry ball, hunched over in the shoulders, with all four paws tucked neatly under her and only two velvety front mittens peeking out.

"Once again I would begin writing quickly and with inspiration. At times I would glance up without moving my head at the cat turned three-quarters towards me. Her huge emerald eye would be fixed on the flame, with the black slit of the pupil cutting across it from top to bottom as narrow as a razor's edge. No matter how instantaneous the movement of my lashes, Yushka would glimpse it and turn her graceful head towards me. The slits would suddenly become gleaming black circles thinly edged with amber. 'All right, Yushka, we'll continue writing.'

"The pen would scratch on and on. Fine, flowing words appeared of their own accord, forming obedient, varied phrases. After a while my head would begin to feel weary, my back would begin to ache, and the fingers of my right hand would begin to tremble. Perhaps I had better turn in.

"Yushka would think so, too. She had long ago invented a game: she would watch the lines closely as they appeared on the paper, her eyes following the pen as she pretended that I was pressing tiny, ugly black flies out of it. She would suddenly smack the last fly with her paw. The blow was always quick and true and the black blood would be smeared across the paper. 'Let's go to bed, Yushka. And let the flies sleep till tomorrow, too.'

"The dim shape of my favourite ash tree could by now be

seen outside the window. Yushka would curl up on the blanket at my feet.

"One day Yushka's friend and tormentor, Kolya, fell ill.

"The cat was not allowed into the sick boy's room, and this was probably right. She might have knocked something over, broken something, awakened or frightened him. She did not have to be told to keep out many times and soon understood the situation. However, she lay down on the floor boards outside the room like a dog, with her pink nose in the crack under the door, and did not budge all the four days, leaving her post only to eat or go out for a short while. It was impossible to make her move. Besides, it would have been cruel to. People stepped over her on their way into or out of the nursery. She was shoved. Someone stepped on her tail, on her paws, and she was kicked aside impatiently. She would merely yelp, move a bit and then gently but persistently return



to her post. Never before had I heard or read of a cat behaving like this. Doctors are rarely surprised by anything. Still, Dr. Shevchenko once said with a condescending smile:

“‘You’ve got a funny cat. He’s actually on duty here! How unusual.’

“Ah, Nika, I did not think it either funny or unusual. My heart still goes out to the memory of Yushka for the compassion she had.

“Now here is something that was also strange. As soon as the last terrible crisis was over and Kolya took a turn for the better, as soon as he was permitted to eat whatever he wished to and even to sit up and play in bed, Yushka left her post. She lay shamelessly on my bed, making up for lost sleep. Then, when she finally paid her first visit to Kolya, she did not even seem excited. He hugged her and squeezed her, and called her pet names, but she slid out of his weakened arms, said *purr*, jumped down and was gone.

“Now, my dear Nika, I’ll tell you about things you probably won’t even believe. Everyone I told this to listened to me with a smile that was a bit mistrustful, a bit arch, forced and polite. At times my friends would say: ‘You writers certainly have vivid imaginations! One can only envy you. Who ever heard of a cat waiting to talk over the phone?’

“But she had. I’ll tell you how it all came about, Nika.

“When Kolya rose from his bed he was thin, pale and green about the gills. His lips were bloodless, his eyes were sunken, and his hands were transparent against the light and just barely pink. But human kindness is a great and inexhaustible force. Kolya, accompanied by his mother, was sent off to recuperate to a wonderful sanatorium about two hundred miles away. The sanatorium could be reached by direct telephone wire from Petrograd and, with some persistence, could even be connected with our suburban settlement,





where we had a phone in the house. Kolya's mamma was very quick to realise this, and one day I was overjoyed and not a little surprised to hear familiar voices over the phone: first a woman's rather tired and businesslike tone and then a child's warm and happy voice.

"After Yushka's two friends, both the bigger and the smaller, had left, she became terribly upset and puzzled. She wandered through the rooms, sniffing in all the corners. She would sniff and say *Mik!* significantly. It was the first time in all our long acquaintance that she had begun saying this word. I can't say what it means in cat-language, but in human language it clearly meant: 'What happened? Where are they? Why have they disappeared?'

"And she would gaze at me wide-eyed. I would see the wonder and the question that demanded an answer in those yellow-green eyes.



“Once again she took to sleeping on the floor, this time in the narrow space between my desk and the couch. In vain did I entice her onto the soft armchair or the sofa. She flatly refused, and if I carried her there she would sit still for a moment, then jump down politely and return to her dark, hard, cold corner.

“Our telephone was on a little round table in the tiny foyer. There was a backless wicker chair next to it. I don’t recall during which of my conversations with the sanatorium I found Yushka sitting at my feet. I do recall that it was shortly after they first started phoning. Soon the cat would come running whenever the telephone rang, until she finally took to living in the foyer.

“I was late in understanding Yushka, and did not realise what was up until she silently leaped from the floor and onto my shoulder during one of my cooing talks with Kolya. She

shifted her weight and stuck her fuzzy head with its alert ears past my cheek.

"I said to myself: 'A cat has very keen ears. At any rate, it can hear better than a dog and much better than a human being'. Yushka had always recognised our footsteps and had come running out to meet us beyond the third crossing whenever we returned home late at night after visiting friends, which meant she knew each member of the family well.

"Then again, there was a very lively little four-year-old named Georgie. The first time he came to visit us he tormented the cat by pulling her ears and tail, squeezing her and carrying her pressed tightly against his stomach. She loathed it all, but being extremely polite, she did not scratch him once. Still, whenever he came to the house after that, no matter whether it was two weeks later, a month later, or even more, she would dash for safety with a pitiful yelp at the first sound of Georgie's piping voice at the threshold. If this was in summer, she would jump out of the nearest open window. In winter she would dart under the sofa or the chest. Indeed, she had a very good memory.

"'What was so unusual about her having recognised Kolya's sweet voice and trying to see where her dearest friend was hiding?' I thought.

"I wanted to check on my guess. The very same evening I wrote a letter to the sanatorium, describing the cat's behaviour in detail and asking Kolya to be sure to remember to repeat the nice words he usually said to Yushka at home the next time he spoke to me. I would hold the receiver close to her ear while he did.

"I soon received a reply. Kolya was very touched by Yushka's devotion and asked to be remembered to her. He would speak to me in two days' time, for the day after they would pack and set out for home.



“Indeed, the next morning the operator informed me that there was a call for me from the sanatorium. Yushka was standing beside me on the floor. I sat her on my lap. Then Kolya’s shrill voice came over the wire. There were so many new impressions and new friends to tell me about. There were so many questions about home, requests and instructions! I was barely able to get my own request in.

“‘Kolya, dear, I’m going to hold the receiver close to Yushka’s ear. All right. Say a few nice words to her.’

“‘What words? I don’t know any words,’ he replied dully.

“‘Kolya, dear, Yushka’s listening. Say something nice to her. Hurry.’

“‘But I don’t know what. I don’t remember,’ he drawled. ‘Will you buy me a birdhouse like they have here to hang outside the window?’

“Be a good boy, Kolya. You’re such a good boy. You promised to talk to Yushka.”

“But I don’t know how to talk cat-talk. I can’t. I for-go-ot.”

“Something clicked and scratched in the phone and the operator’s angry voice intervened: ‘You’re not supposed to talk rubbish. Hang up the receiver. Other parties are waiting.’

“There was a click and the rustle in the phone ended.

“The experiment was a failure. What a shame. I would have very much liked to know whether our intelligent cat would have responded to the familiar words of endearment with her gentle *purrr* or not.

“That’s all about Yushka.

“She died of old age not long ago, and we now have a velvety-coat tomcat. I’ll tell you about him next time, my dear Nika.”



translated from the Russian by Fainna Giagolava

DRAWINGS BY DAVID BOROVSKY

А. КУПРИН
ЮШКА

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